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Group marks World Refugee Day

By [Jim Merkel](#)

The memory of seeing his father slain in front of him stays with Mukhtar Haji, 15 years after it happened.

That incident caused Haji and other family members to make a six week trip on foot from war-torn Somalia to Kenya in 1992. There, Haji stayed in a refugee camp until he came to the United States in 2003.



[Jim Merkel](#) photo

Haji, 29, who now lives in the Soulard neighborhood, was among those attending an observance of World Refugee Day last week at St. John's Episcopal Church, 3664 Arsenal St.

Sponsored by the African Mutual Assistance Association of Missouri, the program June 20 included a meal of Ethiopian food, a presentation on the increasing problem of internally displaced people in Africa and information on the genocide in Darfur. It also featured African music by Alalake Sidime International.

Speaking outside the church as the program wound down, Haji said he now works as a caseworker for African refugees and newcomers for the African Mutual Assistance Association of Missouri.

Conditions in the refugee camp were very hard, Haji said. There was a lack of medicine and the water wasn't clean, he said. It was also extremely hot, he said.

"People have problems with the food because the food is not sufficient for the family," Haji said.

In America, life is much better, said Haji, a father of four. "It is very, very, very good," he said.

Haji was hardly alone in his tale of difficulty.

"We remember Refugee Day with a special emphasis on African refugees and displaced people," said Gedlu Metaferia, director of the African Mutual Assistance Association of Missouri.

Metaferia said the majority of refugees are in Africa. A new group is made up of the four million displaced people in Iraq.

"This event is really about unity," Metaferia said in a statement, "Unity in our community here in St. Louis and unity of our community with refugees around the world. It is especially timely because there is a growing crisis of displaced persons especially in Africa and the Middle East.

Metaferia said he would like to have President Bush make a commitment to help the situation in Darfu and the rest of Africa. The U.S. Senate's debate on comprehensive immigration reform is important, he said.

Among the refugees at the program was Suleiman Sirat, 25, who came to the United States this year, after being in a refugee camp in Kenya since 1998. That year, he escaped from Somalia because of the Civil War and genocide there.

"The gunmen, they do not respect. They are killing people," Sirat said.

In the refugee camps, Sirat received an education, but life was difficult, he said.

Oman Podi, 27, left Somalia for Kenya in 1999 and arrived in the United States this year.

Conditions were harsh in the camps, Podi said. "I got some education but life became very difficult," he said.